**sing to that lonely child**

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# sing to that lonely child

by ravenditefairylights

Summary

Lan Sizhui grows up missing someone. It's in the music of a dizi, in a paper butterfly, in the way he rubs his nose unconsciously when he's upset, in the red ribbon he keeps tucked away, in a million little things he knows even though no one has told him.
Lan Sizhui knows he's missing his mother. It's what makes the most sense; his father is grieving, and his mother isn't here with them to sing him to sleep like Jingyi's used to do. He can't remember his mother, and that's what hurts the most; he doesn't understand how he can mourn her properly when he doesn't even remember her.

or the one where Lan Sizhui grows up missing someone he thinks is lost to him forever, gets his memories back and realizes that he was missing the right person in the wrong name, and finally gets his other father back.

Notes

zongzhu - 宗主 (zōngzhǔ) = sect leader
jie - 姐 (jiě) = older sister / shijie - 师姐 (shījiě) = older martial sister
guma - 姑妈 (gūmā) = elder paternal aunt
qianbei - 前辈 (qiánbèi) = senior / gongzi - 公子 (gōngzǐ) = young master
gege - 哥哥 (gēge) = older brother / xiong - 兄 (xiōng) = elder brother
shidi - 师弟 (shīdi) = younger martial brother
a-die/diedie - 阿爹/爹爹 (diēdie) = dad / shifu - 师父 =martial father
a-niang - 阿娘 (a-niáng) = mother
laoshi - 老师 (lǎoshī) = teacher
bofu - 伯父 (bófù) = eldest paternal uncle / shushu - 叔叔 (shūshu) = younger paternal uncle

See the end of the work for more notes

Lan Sizhui grows up missing someone. It's in the music of a dizi, in a paper butterfly, in the way he rubs his nose unconsciously when he's upset, in the red ribbon he keeps tucked away, in a million little things he knows even though no one has told him.

If he keeps lotus seeds in his pockets, they will bring him good luck. When someone is hurt, stay calm, access the situation quickly and be confident in the course of action you choose. The darkness can't hurt him, but he feels safe in it instead. The red ribbon makes him feel safe too; it will protect him. The red ribbon is the last thing of his mother he has and he never lets go of it.

He's seven years old when bofu comes back really sad and stays in his house for a few days and father worries because Nie-zongzhu, bofu's friend, died. Jingyi's guma, the Lan Sect's best healer, says it was from qi deviation and Jingyi doesn't know what qi deviation is but Lan Yuan tells him that qi deviation is the process of one's qi exploding inside his body so violently it turns into resentful energy and you bleed from all your organs, even though he can't remember anyone ever telling him that. The first time father teaches him to fly, Lan Yuan is ten and he starts crying even though he has no idea why, but nothing can console him until he exhausts himself and falls asleep. He's nine and Lan-laoshi asks the class how one can stay in the path of righteousness and Lan Yuan says *'be kind'* and doesn't understand why the others kid laugh and father looks so sad.

Lan Sizhui knows he's missing his mother. It's what makes the most sense; his father is grieving, and his mother isn't here with them to sing him to sleep like Jingyi's used to do. He can't remember his mother, and that's what hurts the most; he doesn't understand how he can mourn her properly when he doesn't even remember her.

*Sizhui. To recollect and long for.*

Lan Sizhui *tries*, but he can never make himself remember her. She's the melody of a sorrowful song in the wind that makes father cry every time and lulls him to sleep. She's in the notes of Inquiry, the first song on the qin he learns to play only from watching father play it over and over again and cry when he can't seem to find who he's looking for. She's in the way father looks at him sadly sometimes, like Lan Sizhui reminds him of her. She's in the emptiness between them; her absence is the loudest thing he knows.

Lan Sizhui clings to every part of her—she's in every part of his life that doesn't make sense—and he collects of all them, trying to remember her. He feels that if he has enough pieces, eventually he will come to remember the sound of his mother's laugh, her face, her voice. The pieces help him learn about her a little better.

He gets excited over a dizi the first time he ever sees one, even though that doesn't really make sense. He asks father, and father says that his mother used to play the dizi. Lan Yuan asks if he can learn how to play it too, but father looks at him with so much *pain* in his eyes that he feels bad for ever bringing it up, and never asks again. He thinks about the lotus seeds and concludes that his mother must have been from Yunmeng—from one of the smaller sects, maybe, since no one knows her—because that's the only place lotus flowers grow. She was kind, Lan Sizhui thinks. He thinks back to all the times it seemed like father saw her in him.

She was happy; she must have laughed a lot. She was a cultivator. She must have been fearless. She made father happy. She loved them.

Lan Sizhui can't remember many things about her. The pieces make up a half-formed thread, a blurry image of someone he will never see again. Sometimes he dreams of a face with a red ribbon, laughing, and he clings to it with everything he has, but he can never retain anything more than the feeling of love and safety when he wakes up.

No one tells him anything about her. He is never going to ask grand-uncle about her, because even though he's kind to Lan Sizhui now, his face still sours every time she's mentioned. Grand-uncle didn't like mother, Lan Sizhui concludes, and he doesn't want to hear about her from someone who didn't love her like he and father do. He asked bofu, once, but he looked so pained that he never brought it up again. Bofu said she loved him, and that father loved her very much, and that she was brilliant and smart, like he is. He said that last thing like an afterthought, as if he thought giving his nephew a chunk of her would satisfy any further questions.

Her absence is loud, and it hurts him. Lan Sizhui thinks maybe the Elders didn't like her, maybe she wasn't a respectable match for Hanguang-jun and that's why no one wants to talk about her. She's not even on their family tree—when he looks at the books the first time, he cries himself to sleep. Sometimes the other children are mean, and they call him names—call him a bastard child; Jingyi usually punches them and bears the punishment with dignity. No one is allowed to make fun of his best friend, Jingyi tells him, and Jingyi is a really great friend.

Everyone in the Lan Sect act as if his mother never existed, and others call her names, speculate all sorts of uncourteous things; it's like they think that if they try hard enough to ignore her existence, she might cease to exist, even in memory.

Lan Sizhui *hates* every second of it.

He tells Jingyi sometimes, what he remembers about her, and Jingyi listens with a patience and still silence he never does anything else with. He tells Jingyi that he hates that only he and father seem to love her, and Jingyi promises—in all the severity of a six-year-old—that he too will love Sizhui's mother now, so she won't be forgotten. Sizhui is so glad he and Jingyi are friends.

He's fourteen years old when he gathers the courage to ask father about her. He used to ask more, when he was little, but it made father sad, so he stopped. He's got a collection of blurry, seemingly unimportant memories of her pieced together into something fragile and a little broken that makes up her face in his mind. It will make father sad, he knows, but he deserves to know more about her. If he knows more, he can make sure to remember her better, like she deserves.

"A-die," he says when their dinner is over, gathering all his courage in a breath and letting it out. His father hums, the way he does when Sizhui has his full attention even when he's still looking down at their plates. "A-die, what was a-niang like?"

His father stills. It's like every nerve in his body suddenly freezes, and Sizhui sees the conscious effort it takes to suck in a breath. He wants to, but he doesn't take his words back; he stares at his father resolutely, curiously, and a little afraid. They stay like that for a few long moments, in silence as Sizhui's heartbeat pounds in his ears. His father closes his eyes and takes another breath, and when he opens them again, something seems to settle.

"Your mother," father starts, and then halts suddenly. He sounds pained, but he hasn't told Sizhui to drop the subject, so Sizhui doesn't. "Your mother was… bright."

Sizhui swallows. Asking and getting are two different things, he knows, and he's finally *getting*. He leans forward despite himself, eyes wide, and swears to himself that he will soak up every word.

"She was like the sun," father says, and his eyes take a wistful look Sizhui has seen on him a few times, but never so openly. "She was beautiful. Happy. She was a very happy person. She laughed thoughtlessly, like every little thing could give her joy no matter how small it was." Father's words are steadier now, like it's easier to talk once he's begun. "She loved you more than anything else—she used to call you her little radish. And she was… she was clever—cleverer than most people. She was inventive and ingenious, but rarely applied herself. She could do… extraordinary things when she put her mind to it. She didn't like it here, in the Cloud Recesses—she was a free spirit and the rules confined her. She was loud and rude, and kind, immensely so. You are kind like her, a-Yuan," father says, smiling at him a little. Sizhui smiles back. "You have a heart as big as hers."

He's proud to be like her, any little piece of her. *Kind*. Sizhui can be kind for her.

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The night-hunt in Mo village was not supposed to be half as hard as it turned out to be.

The arm has come out of nowhere, and it's so powerful Sizhui doesn't think he and Jingyi are going to make it out of this if a senior doesn't show up soon. The entire Mo family is already dead; except for that man, Mo Xuanyu. Jingyi gets angry at him, and Sizhui can understand that Mo-gongzi is… a difficult person. However, that doesn't make him crazy.

He put on a show, before, crying and yelling and accusing and being everything the Lan Sect discourages being. But hitting members of your family or mistreating them—*killing them*—is also something the Lan Sect forbids, and Sizhui thinks the Mo family did all that to Mo-gongzi. Mo-gongzi seems like a lunatic; he certainly *acts* like a lunatic, but his eyes are not crazy. His eyes had looked bright and focused the whole time, mischievous and calculative, like every one of his actions was weighted, calculated to create the reaction he wanted.

And yet….

His cries for help do sound genuine. Sizhui and Jingyi were using the Yiling Patriarch's spirit lure flags—father said that the Yiling Patriarch was intelligent and should be respected as a senior despite his demonic ways, and without his demonic cultivation the war would have been lost. Sizhui agrees; the Yiling Patriarch's inventions are what renovated the cultivation world, and if nothing else, that deserves credit. But the matter remains; they are using the

Yiling Patriarch's flags and Mo-gongzi, someone who Mo-furen claimed trained with the Jin Sect, should know what the flags were.

In the end, he's too busy trying not to die to give Mo-gongzi too much thought, and then father is there, and Sizhui can talk to him about Mo-gongzi later. The rising fierce corpses, he thinks, might be a little more important right now.

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In Mo-gongzi's… residence, there's an array drawn in blood.

Sizhui can't make out what it is, or what it's supposed to do, but father confirms that it had nothing to do with the demonic arm, or the corpses, even though the array itself is demonic in nature and even *he* doesn't know *what* exactly it does. Father says Mo-gongzi must have followed the path of demonic cultivation, and Jingyi sours. Lan-laoshi has made it clear in his lectures that demonic cultivation is heresy, it is forbidden.

Sizhui asks if Mo-gongzi rose the corpses to help them, and father hums. Jingyi does not stop speculating on the whole way to Mountain Dafan, and Sizhui needs to remind him a total of three times that the Mo family was killed by the demonic arm and not Mo-gongzi.

And then they run into Mo-gongzi again. Mo-gongzi, who plays the dizi horribly and somehow still manages to summon the *Ghost General*.

The Ghost General is a legend of the same scale as the Yiling Patriarch. He's the most dangerous ferocious corpse that's ever been brought back, they say. The Yiling Patriarch's right hand that would rain hell on anyone his master commanded him to. Tall and rotten and dangerous. Sizhui has never put too much stock in rumors like these; they say similar things about the Yiling Patriarch, and father has made it clear that most of them aren't true.

His father is now looking at Mo-gongzi with a look Sizhui has definitely never seen on his father's face before, and he doesn't think anyone else notices the intensity of the gaze he has locked on Mo-gongzi. The latter cowers and cries and hides behind Hanguang-jun; in much the same way he did before, in the Mo village. Jiang-zongzhu accuses him of being the Yiling Patriarch back from the dead, stealing another man's body, but one strike with Zidian is enough to repel that notion; no soul is pulled out of Mo-gongzi's body, which means the body wasn't stolen.

Mo-gongzi, Sizhui thinks, cannot be the Yiling Patriarch. He doesn't believe most exaggerated rumors about Wei Wuxian, but it's no rumor that he slaughtered thousands of people in the Nightless City, that he killed Jin Zixuan. The Yiling Patriarch, he thinks, wouldn't come back in the world when the world made it so clear he had no place in it; who would want to?

Sizhui isn't surprised when father declares they will be taking Mo-gongzi to the Cloud Recesses. His own account of the events made it clear that Mo-gongzi was helping them—the summoning of the Ghost General only confirmed his association with demonic cultivation—and that his own family was abusing him. The Cloud Recesses is an ideal place for someone like him to heal and come back to the right path.

He *is* surprised, very surprised, when father tells them to take Mo-gongzi to the jingshi. For years, for as long as Sizhui remembers, the jingshi has been father's and only he and bofu were allowed inside. He had always thought the jingshi was his parents' house, but he ignores Jingyi's bewildered look and does as his father says. Hanguang-jun always has reasons for his actions, and they are correct most of the time.

Getting Mo-gongzi there is easier said than done. They saddle the donkey with some of their shidis, and between the two of them, attempt to escort Mo-gongzi to the jingshi. He makes it as hard as he can; he yells, he kicks, he cries, he tries to run away. Jingyi yells at him too many times, but Sizhui looks the other way; Jingyi has copied the rules enough times in his life, and he doesn't want to stifle his friend's personality.

"Mo-gongzi, please," Sizhui tells him politely. "Hanguang-jun has asked us to escort you to his house, we are only doing as we are told. There is no need for you to be afraid, Hanguang-jun is a good man and he only wants to help you."

Mo-gongzi stares at him with his big, grey eyes, and the thought comes back, unbidden. This man is no lunatic. His actions certainly say so, but his eyes don't. He looks at Sizhui for a long moment, eyes sparkling with calculation and something else he thinks might be suspicion; which makes sense, not many people have been kind to Mo-gongzi in his life.

"Yes," Mo-gongzi says suddenly, and goes limp in Jingyi's strong hold so suddenly that Jingyi almost trips. "You're right. There is no need to get you little ones into trouble. Lead the way, then—Sizhui, wasn't it?"

No, Sizhui decides, Mo-gongzi is definitely not a lunatic. He doesn't really understand why he feels the need to act as if he is, though.

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"I just don't understand why Hanguang-jun puts up with him, that's all," Jingyi says, cradling a bunny. "Mo-gongzi is shameless! Didn't you hear what he said about looking at Hanguang-jun when he was bathing?"

Sizhui has not managed to live the mortification down yet, no. Father was unconcerned enough that Sizhui believes the words weren't true at all, but they were still… After all the crying and screaming didn't work, Mo-gongzi seems to think that if he is lewd and shameless enough, they will kick him out; Sizhui can't believe anyone would be shameless enough to do that to *Hanguang-jun*, but he understands why Mo-gongzi would think that if he emphasized being a cutsleeve, they'd kick him out. His family had used it as a degrading insult.

"We shouldn't judge without having all the facts," Sizhui says finally, reciting one of his favourite rules. "Mo-gongzi has been mistreated all his life—we need to earn his trust to help him realize we're on his side, and that we just want to help him."

"Stop being so smart," Jingyi rolls his eyes. "It's making me feel bad. And anyway, aren't you feeling—I don't know, uncomfortable? Hanguang-jun has never let anyone inside his jingshi before."

“I know,” Sizhui says. No, father hasn’t, and the weird intense look he had been giving Mo-gongzi in Mountain Dafan has not disappeared; it’s there every time father looks at him. Sizhui wonders if Mo-gongzi reminds his father of someone. “But… you saw how the doors to the mingshi opened for Mo-gongzi. No one is supposed to be able to do that, and his flute playing *was* terrible, but even Lan-laoshi admitted Mo-gongzi is a powerful cultivator. If Hanguang-jun is letting him assist in the investigation, he has good reason. We shouldn’t question him.”

“I’m not questioning him,” Jingyi protests. “I’m just hesitant to trust the lunatic, that’s all. I mean, he’s a demonic cultivator, Sizhui! What if his motives are impure?”

“Hanguang-jun can handle himself, Jingyi,” Sizhui tells him, a little amused. Jingyi has been worshiping Hanguang-jun ever since he was very little. He had been so impressed when he learned Sizhui was his son. “He’s not Hanguang-jun for nothing.”

“I know he can,” Jingyi says sullenly, and squeezes the rabbit in his hands so suddenly that it jumps away from him. “Hey, no!” Jingyi cries, indignant. “Come back! Sizhui, they all like you better, that’s so unfair. Come back!” Jingyi tells the rabbit and scrambles a little to try and catch it again, but the rabbit is faster than he is.

Sizhui laughs.

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After Mo village, he should have had an inkling that their next night-hunt might end up being as bad as that. He thinks, looking around the foggy town with Jin-gongzi’s complaining in the background, that he should have been better prepared.

The mystery with the dead cats was weird and a little creepy, if Sizhui is being honest. They decided to chase it because his shidis looked excited at the prospect, and it seemed harmless enough. When they met Jin-gongzi and the others somewhere in the middle, he did think it was very peculiar. He didn’t think it was a trap, but maybe he should have.

The town is terrible, empty and covered in a fog that raises goosebumps along Sizhui’s skin. Jingyi had remarked that a town called ‘Yi City’ could only be bad news, and silently he can’t help but agree. The place is terrible. He counts their disciples, counts the Ouyang and Yao disciples as well, to be sure. There’s five of them, nine of them and Jin-gongzi. Sizhui doesn’t like the numbers. It will be too easy for them to be separated in that fog.

Not to mention that creepy pole sound that hasn’t stopped following them the whole time.

“What do you think of the town, Sizhui-xiong?” Ouyang Zizhen asks, coming to a stop next to him. Jingyi is arguing with Jin-gongzi a few paces ahead, but Sizhui gives it a few moments before he calls out to remind them to be nice. Ouyang Zizhen seems nice enough; he hasn’t stopped smiling the whole time, and despite how scared he looked earlier, he doesn’t look too troubled now.

“I don’t know what to make of it, Ouyang-gongzi,” Sizhui replies politely. “It’s been emptied, that much is clear, but I can’t say… the fog is too thick to determine anything. We should stay close together.”

“Call me Zizhen-xiong,” Ouyang Zizhen tells him, almost dismissively. “And I do think you’re right—maybe all the people in the town were killed and it’s haunted now? That pole sound is really scary, Sizhui-xiong.”

*“Shixiong!”* Shen-shidi calls from the front. “Shixiong! There are fierce corpses!”

Sizhui tenses, his hand flying to the hilt of his sword; he can see Ouyang Zizhen do the same next to him. Somehow, even in this fog, Jingyi finds his way to his side.

“We can’t fight fierce corpses in this fog,” Jingyi says, ever practical. “We’ll get separated, and we might hurt each other by mistake. To the others he calls; “Fall back! We need to stay together!”

Sizhui looks around carefully. There isn’t anything to hear, but if he squints, he can just make out something moving… A flash, and he can feel Jingyi about to reprimand the disciple who unsheathed its sword—it’s a Lan sword, and it looks very familiar. Next to him, Ouyang Zizhen gasps.

“Is that Bichen?” he asks, almost in awe. Sizhui snaps his eyes to sword and yes, that does look like Bichen, especially when it returns to the hands of someone—

“Hanguang-jun!” Jingyi calls, ecstatic. Sizhui will not deny that he is relieved to see his father as well. This will be a lot easier—and safer—if his father is here, and he feels the responsibility of his shidis’ safety that weighted on his shoulders lessen.

The fog clears, just enough for them to be able to see more clearly. He’s not sure how that’s happened, but he will take it. He rushes forward with the rest of the disciples and bows formally. His father isn’t there but Mo-gongzi is, in a pair of dark robes. He can hear the sounds of sword clashing from somewhere behind them, and supposed his father is making work of these fierce corpses.

“Jin Ling? Sizhui?” Mo-gongzi says, and he sounds surprised as he looks from one of them to the other. He doesn’t greet Jingyi, and Sizhui wonders if Jingyi had bothered to introduce himself for all that he yelled at Mo-gongzi. “What are you doing here? Don’t tell you all came night-hunting here together.”

“Mo-gongzi,” he greets, not bothering to get the warmth out of his voice. “If you’re here, then does that mean Hanguang-jun is here as well?”

“Of course he is!” Jingyi exclaims proudly. “That sword from before was definitely Bichen, right?”

“He is, he’s here,” Mo-gongzi confirms, looking at all of them curiously. “But why are *you* all here?”

“We all came here chasing after something,” Jin-gongzi says, looking entirely put out by encountering Mo-gongzi again, but thankfully not as agitated as he was in Mountain Dafan. “I came here from Qinghe.”

“And we came from Langya,” Sizhui adds. Mo-gongzi nods, entirely serious. There isn’t a trace of his pretended lunacy on his face anymore; his eyes alert and sharp. Sizhui hopes that this is a good thing—maybe Mo-gongzi has realized father wants to help him now.

“What were you chasing after?” Mo-gongzi asks.

“We don’t know,” Sizhui admits. It sounds stupid when he says it like that. “It never showed its face.” Then he tenses, hearing the tapping sound of the pole.

“It’s here again!” Ouyang Zizhen cries, looking around as if her will be able to see it. One of the Yao disciples despairs.

“Just how long has it been following us?”

“It’s been following you?” Mo-gongzi asks. His brows are furrowed together in either thought or concern; Sizhui can’t tell. He explains, instead, what the sound is and how they all came here. Mo-gongzi looks thoughtful when he finishes. This particular night-hunt just got a lot more interesting; but in the last one Mo-gongzi was in, he and Jingyi very nearly died, so he doesn’t really know how to feel about that.

There’s some inexplicable mirth in the man when he congratulates them on being poisoned and about to die, and Sizhui abandons kindness for a second to be unreasonable upset about that; he can’t laugh at this, not when his shidis are endangered, not when Jingyi is leaning so heavily on him, barely supporting his own weight. The congee is a very smart solution—even if it’s entirely too spicy, and Sizhui has eaten considerable portions of spice before—and he can’t help but marvel at how *sharp* Mo-gongzi actually is. Why would anyone so clever and well-versed in cultivation as Mo-gongzi clearly is, pretend to be a lunatic?

The way he teaches—because Sizhui understands that the man is *teaching them*, even if he himself doesn’t seem particularly aware of it—is almost like Hanguang-jun’s; he doesn’t give them ready answers and expect them to learn them, he probs and leads them to the solution until they find it themselves, making the lesson more enjoyable and much easier to remember. Even Jin-gongzi appears impressed, though Sizhui doesn’t think he’ll admit it.

Mo-gongzi and Hanguang-jun are similar enough in their disposition, that Sizhui thinks he understands why father decided to help Mo-gongzi. As long as either of these seniors is here, Sizhui feels safe, like he doesn’t need to worry about anything.

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It turns out that Mo-qianbei is not only sane but an incredible teacher as well, and even Jingyi admits so this time.

The inn they’ve chosen is now entirely full of all of them, and even though Sizhui knows he should be sleeping—it’s almost past nine—he allows himself this, as a reward for surviving through Yi City, Jingyi said. He’s not going to touch the alcohol, but he can join in the conversation.

The conversation that is currently centered around how *cool* Mo-qianbei is. The only one who seems to vocally disagree is Jin-gongzi, but it’s clear that, too, is half-hearted at best.

Sizhui's table is occupied by him and Jingyi and Zizhen-xiong as well as Jin-gongzi, who is sulking in the corner—Jingyi's words—more than anything else. Zizhen-xiong is talking about Mo-qianbei the same way Jingyi talks about Hanguang-jun, and he's not entirely sure the two of them won't get in a fight about which one is better.

"And the way he executed the Painted Eyes Summoning—wasn't that impressive?" Zizhen-xiong asks none of them in particular. "It's an incredibly difficult spell, and to do it so well, and with such ease! I don't understand why your sect would thrown him out, Jin Ling, even if he's not using traditional cultivation. He saved our lives so many times today!"

"Hanguang-jun did too!" Jingyi points out, sounding perhaps a little miffed that his favourite senior isn't getting enough credit.

"Well yes, but we all know Hanguang-jun is an impressive cultivator, don't we?" Zizhen-xiong shrugs. "He's renowned in all the cultivation world! Mo-qianbei isn't, but he should be! Did you see for how long he performed Empathy? I didn't think that was possible at all!"

"It was *stupid*," Jin-gongzi tells them sullenly. "He almost didn't make it out. I had to ring my bell in his ear for almost a minute until he snapped out of it!"

"The story about Xiao-daozhang and Song-daozhang was so sad though," Zizhen-xiong says, eyes suspiciously misty. "And Qing-guniang was so brave! So kind!" Ouyang Zizhen bursts into tears over Qing-guniang for nothing less than the sixth time today, so Sizhui calmly hands him a handkerchief and does not panic like he did the first time Zizhen-xiong and Jingyi both burst into tears.

He thinks the others might not have adjusted to that as well as he did when a hush falls over the disciples, but when he raises his head, he can see father and Mo-qianbei. Jingyi starts violently and tries to hide the alcohol, and so do a dozen more disciples. Father… doesn't appear to notice. He looks less focused than Sizhui is used to. Behind him, Mo-qianbei is actually *blushing*.

Sizhui doesn't understand what is going on, and then Jingyi makes a noise like he's choking, eyes transfixed on Mo-qianbei's hands. He and father are standing very close—almost inappropriately close—so Sizhui doesn't notice anything wrong. Mo-qianbei is almost entirely hidden behind father, like he wants to be anywhere but there. He falls a bit forward, like he was pulled, and Sizhui—*freezes*.

Mo-qianbei's wrists are tied with his father's forehead ribbon. He stares, and then snaps his eyes to his father's empty—empty!—forehead and back at Mo-qianbei's wrists. They are *tied* with *his father's forehead ribbon*. Sizhui swallows with great difficulty. Mo-qianbei laughs awkwardly and says something silly, but Sizhui isn't paying him any attention. He thinks a bit light-headed even though he didn't touch the alcohol.

"Sizhui?" Jingyi asks tentatively and so unlike Jingyi. "Lan Yuan? Are you okay?" His friend sounds concerned, but Sizhui can't answer. His father had given his forehead ribbon to *someone else*.

“What was that?” Zizhen-xiong asks, puzzled. Jin-gongzi looks a bit stunned. “Why do you all look so shocked? Was it the forehead ribbon? What does that mean?”

It means, Sizhui thinks faintly, that his mother’s absence doesn’t hurt father anymore. Which should be, he reasons with himself, something good. Father has grieved for so long, so intensely that a curtain of sorrow always seems to hang around him. Father isn’t sad anymore, and Sizhui should be happy for him. Was this what the look had meant? But father hadn’t known Mo-qianbei at all before.

Sizhui tells himself that this is good. He himself doesn’t even remember his mother, not really, and father should be allowed to move on, especially with someone who can make him happy. Sizhui even *likes* Mo-qianbei.

But there’s a suffocating lump in his throat, restricting his breath, and his eyes are burning. Father gave his forehead ribbon to *someone else*. And he hadn’t even talked about it with Sizhui beforehand. Father always asks if Sizhui is comfortable with new things, and he thinks the replacement of his mother should have been one of those.

“Excuse me,” he manages to ground out, stiff and a bit chocked, and then flees in the most respectable way possible.

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He pretends to be asleep when Jingyi comes into their room a while later, when Sizhui has finished crying like a child.

He presses his face into the pillow and listens as Jingyi gets ready for bed. It must be way past nine by now. Sizhui doesn’t particularly care. He’s exhausted. He wants a hug. He actually *really* wants a hug, but he is… less favourable towards his father right now. He doesn’t particularly want to examine those feelings. He hopes they might go away in the morning. Maybe he can just sleep them off.

There’s a stretch of silence after Jingyi lays down, broken a few heartbeats later by Jingyi himself.

“Sizhui?” his friend asks tentatively. “Are you awake?”

Sizhui wonders if he should pretend to be asleep until he falls asleep for real. But Jingyi sounds genuinely upset, and it might not all stem because Sizhui himself is upset. They’ve been doing this, talking in the dark from their respective beds, ever since Sizhui can remember. It’s a comforting ritual.

“Yes,” he says finally, voice a bit muffled from the pillow. It carries around the room anyway.

“Are you okay?” Jingyi asks in the same tone. He sounds careful, the way he did when Sizhui talked about his mother and ended up crying.

“I don’t know,” Sizhui mumbles, and it’s the truth. He’s not sure what he’s feeling, but there’s a lot of it, and he would like it not to. He doesn’t know where to start about this. There are long moments of silence when neither of them says anything.

“Are you angry?” Jingyi asks, still careful; almost gentle with it. Is he? Sizhui can’t tell.

“I don’t know,” he repeats, resigned. He feels a little like Nie-zongzhu. “Are *you* angry?”

“No,” Jingyi says, but he sounds unsure. “Maybe. I don’t know. It’s just… what about your a-niang, Sizhui?” Sizhui doesn’t say anything; his throat feels clogged again. Jingyi takes it as a sign to end the conversation, and it might be just as well because Sizhui doesn’t know what to say. “Goodnight, Sizhui.”

“Goodnight, Jingyi,” Sizhui calls softly back, and lets himself drift until he hears the sound of Jingyi’s breathing evening out. There is no one in the world who loves Sizhui’s mother like he does, except maybe Jingyi. Jingyi has grown up on Sizhui’s tattered memories of her because Sizhui had felt the overwhelming need to *share* that part of him. His mother was *his*, but she was also father’s, and no one wanted to talk about her. Learn about her. It had been a relief that Jingyi had; that Jingyi loved her, in his own way that a child can love someone else's ghost.

Should he be angry? Would his mother have been angry? You’re supposed to be happy for your loved ones when they are. Maybe mother would be happy that father wasn’t so sad anymore. Or maybe she’d be angry; after all, everyone is trying to make her disappear, and now father, the only other person who loves her like Sizhui does, is replacing her. Or maybe not *replacing* her. Maybe he’s just… making a new spot in his heart for Mo-qianbei. He doesn’t have to stop loving mother, has he?

Sizhui feels so confused. Is he angry? He’s not angry for himself, no, but he might be on mother’s behalf. She can’t be forgotten. She doesn’t deserve to. Sizhui is here, he’s proof, in his own way, that once mother had been here to. Is father being unfaithful when she has been dead for so many years? Surely, if she had loved him as much as he loved her, she wouldn’t want him to be sad, even if he found happiness again with someone else.

Father said she was kind, like Sizhui was. Sizhui could forgive him this, he thinks, if father is truly happy. And he does genuinely like Mo-qianbei. He’s smart, and quick on his feet—a little difficult perhaps, somewhat thick-faced, but that’s not… a bad thing. The demonic cultivation is an issue, but Mo-qianbei has done nothing than help people with it. Xue Yang had used demonic cultivation too, but there were no similarities between him and Mo-qianbei.

He wonders if mother would like Mo-qianbei. Father likes him enough to claim him as his cultivation partner, stained reputation or not, so maybe she would, too. And Sizhui likes him too, and father always looks at him like he bleeds his mother’s echo when he breathes, so he thinks she would like Mo-qianbei too. He closes his eyes and tries to picture her. She was beautiful, father said, like the sun. Smiled widely. Had the brightest laugh. She wore his red ribbon in her hair. The image that comes is blurry, not really a face at all, but the *feeling* is there, all of it, and Sizhui feels warm all over.

He wonders what it would feel like, to be hugged by his mother. How do mothers hug? Father hugged him like Sizhui was something precious, something small and important he had to protect. It had always made Sizhui feel loved, important. Maybe mothers hug like that,

too. Jingyi said his mother used to hug him tightly, like he might jump from her arms any moment. It was Jingyi, so he probably did.

Mothers, Sizhui thinks, must hug you like they love you too much to let you go, hug you tightly enough to feel safe, like father makes him feel. Something warm and steady and sempiternal, their unyielding love like the sun.

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The next morning, his feelings have settled a little, so thinks sleeping them off has worked good so far.

They part ways with Jin-gongzi and the rest of the disciples; Zizhen-xiong's goodbye is so heartfelt Sizhui feels like Zizhen-xiong might burst into tears at any moment again, but he doesn't. He watches Jin-gongzi talk to Mo-qianbei a bit further ahead, their conversation devoid of Jin-gongzi's sharpness and anger. He has a feeling he knows what they're talking about and scolds himself. He shouldn't be looking.

They will be meeting bofu later today, and during the whole journey he and Jingyi watch father closely. He *is* happier, Sizhui notices. He and Mo-qianbei walk further in the front, and Sizhui can't hear what Mo-qianbei is talking about, but he appears to be talking a lot. He talks in the same rhythm as he walks, paced and never-ending, waving his wands enthusiastically all the while. Sometimes he leans right into father's personal space, touches him—quick, fleeting touches that are barely there, or touches that last, like draping himself over his shoulders. Father doesn't seem to mind.

He takes all of it—the chatter, the touches, the hurricane Mo-qianbei moves like—in stride, never once pausing. He smiles down at Mo-qianbei sometimes, when the man isn't looking; but he and Jingyi are. He doesn't lean away from the touches, doesn't complain about the silence of their walk being disturbed—he even reaches out to touch Mo-qianbei himself. A brush of hands there, a steadying hand on his elbow when he trips, on his shoulder when he seems about to lose his balance.

His father is *happy*, and a part of Sizhui hurts with the knowledge that it isn't his mother that makes him so, but the bigger part of him is happy that father is truly *happy* now. Father deserves to be happy too; and so is Mo-qianbei, by the looks of it. Sizhui can’t begrudge them that.

“That’s not fair,” Jingyi tells him suddenly, sometime in their walk. Sizhui has noticed that Jingyi was much quieter than usual today, so he waits for his friend to elaborate. “It’s just—it’s not *fair*, Sizhui, what about your mother?”

Sizhui looks at father, who’s smiling again. He hasn’t seen father smile like this in so long. Ever, maybe, that he remembers. “He’s happy, Jingyi,” he tells his friend, and he thinks this time he doesn’t sound sad at all. “She would have wanted him to be happy.”

Jingyi makes an indignant noise, but he doesn’t rile himself up. “I just don’t think this is right, is all,” he says finally, sounding uncharacteristically subdued. “Hardly anyone remembers her—Hanguang-jun shouldn’t just… replace her—and with a lunatic, no less!”

“Don’t be mean to Mo-qianbei,” Sizhui smacks Jingyi lightly on the arm, ignoring the ache inside him. Jingyi rolls his eyes, and they continue to walk, this time in relative silence. Sizhui keeps watching his father and Mo-qianbei and feels a bit less conflicted than before. Surely, falling in love with someone else can’t be that bad, not when it makes father so happy.

He hadn’t thought that Mo-qianbei might not know the meaning of the forehead ribbon until the man himself asks; he looks shy and nervous and not at all like the exuberant and self-assured man who had been keeping them safe in Yi City. Sizhui knows that sometimes father talks with his actions and forgets to say the words, so he takes pity on Mo-qianbei and explains. He doesn’t expect Mo-qianbei to go running around a tree after he learns, but it’s… endearing, the way he’s so free with his emotions.

“Aw, look how happy he is!” one of the younger disciples says, and Jingyi snorts. Sizhui admonishes him gently. No, something that makes people so happy can’t be bad. It made his mother happy like this once, he thinks. It feels right that her happiness should be shared; more people should appreciate his father for himself and not just for Hanguang-jun.

Once Mo-qianbei has settled down and his shidis return to their own quiet conversations, Sizhui stands and goes to sit next to him, on the tree bank he’s chosen.

“Ah, Sizhui,” Mo-qianbei says, giving him a smile. It’s small but sweet and makes something in him ache with how familiar it is. Maybe mother smiled like that. “How are you? Getting bored out here on your own?”

“I am well, Mo-qianbei,” Sizhui tells him with a smile of his own. “And you?”

“Ah, I’m great!” Mo-qianbei says, a little underwhelmingly. “This poor senior is just fine, Sizhui, there’s no need to worry about him.”

Sizhui smiles. “May I ask a question?”

“Anything you want,” Mo-qianbei says earnestly. “Provided I can answer it, I will do my best to reply.”

Sizhui nods; he wasn’t expecting anything else. He feels only a little nervous—something about Mo-qianbei makes him feel at ease. It’s too easy to talk to him. “Mo-qianbei… have you known Hanguang-jun a long time? As in, from… before we met you at Mountain Dafan?”

There’s a stretch of silence. It doesn’t feel intrusive; more like Mo-qianbei is gathering his thoughts, so Sizhui waits patiently. Father needs to search for words sometimes too, everybody does. *Take your time to formulate your answer properly*, the rule rings in Sizhui’s head. There’s always time to say what you need to say.

“Your Hanguang-jun and I, we have known each other for a very long time,” Mo-qianbei says finally. His voice is somber and little wistful, reminiscent. “It feels forever, sometimes, how long I’ve known him for, even though it’s nowhere near that. I didn’t… I didn’t expect to see him again or stand by his side—especially stand by his side. We both took different paths in life, and they led us to different places.”

“But now they led you back to each other,” Sizhui says, thinking the words over. Maybe father has loved Mo-qianbei for more than Sizhui knows.

“Yes,” Mo-qianbei says with a small smile. It looks entirely too sad; he would have thought Mo-qianbei would be happier, to meet with father again, and like this. “Yes, they have, haven’t they? It’s funny, sometimes, how the world works.” He directs his eyes to the stars above them and doesn’t say anything. Sizhui doesn’t say anything either, until it’s time to go to sleep.

He can’t help thinking that Mo-qianbei feels familiar, like a word in a poem or a note in a song that he ought to know. It’s almost like… Mo-qianbei reminds him or someone, but when he searches for a face, a name, the space is empty.

He takes the paper butterfly out; he has the red ribbon tied around the edges of it, and runs his fingers over the fabric, over the brown paper and falls asleep holding it in his hands.

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Father says he and bofu will go to Lanling, and Mo-qianbei will accompany them. Jingyi and Sizhui are tasked with taking the disciples back home. Sizhui lingers after the disciples, trying to catch father’s attention. The moment he’s noticed, father excuses himself to Mo-qianbei and walks over to him. Sizhui bows respectfully.

“Hanguang-jun.”

“Sizhui,” father acknowledges with a smile. “What is it?”

“Hanguang-jun, I…” he knows he’s not supposed to address father informally in public, but this conversation calls for it, and he thinks father would forgive him this once. “A-die, I wanted to speak to you, if you have a moment,” he says, looking up at his father hopefully. Father’s brows furrow, but he nods and leads them both a bit further away. Sizhui swallows nervously and tells himself that it really isn’t as big a thing as he makes it out to be. Father proclaimed his love for Mo-qianbei in front of all of them, after all.

“A-die, I wanted to tell you that…” he’s not sure how to say this. Jingyi would say just blurt the words and something is bound to come out first. Sizhui never takes the advice, but he tries to just say it, this once. “About Mo-qianbei.” Father looks surprised. “A-die, I’m happy for you,” Sizhui manages finally, satisfied the words sound the way he wants them to. “You have been sad for many years over mother, and it’s good to see you be happy again—even if it’s not with her. You should be happy, and Mo-qianbei seems like a good person—” he remembers the issue of demonic cultivation suddenly “—despite his unorthodox cultivation. I like him too. I’m just… I’m happy for you, and you shouldn’t feel guilty. I’m sure mother would want you to be happy as well.”

His father stares at him with an expression he can’t recognize. If it was anyone else, Sizhui would say they look mildly panicked, but it’s *father*. Surely not. He must be surprised that Sizhui brought it up suddenly, is all. He feels silly, all of a sudden. This isn’t his place.

“Anyway, I’m—have a safe trip to Lanling, Hanguang-jun,” he flushes at his fumbling, bows politely and skids back next to Jingyi where the rest of the juniors are already preparing to

leave.

“How did that go?” Jingyi whispers, attempting to shove his sleeping mat into his qiankun pouch and encountering some difficulties. Sizhui moves to help him instinctively.

“Fine,” he whispers back, red at the face. “It went fine.”

Jingyi gives him a dubious look, as if to say he can’t see that, but he doesn’t press. Between the two of them, they manage to squeeze Jingyi’s mat inside and then all of them are packed and ready to go. With bows to bofu and Hanguang-jun and Mo-qianbei, they set off.

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Lan Sizhui is an idiot. He is a complete, irresponsible *idiot*, who should have never been given the title of head disciple.

Not only did he manage to get himself and his shidis into this ridiculous trap, tied together inside a cave in the *Burial Mounds*, one of the most notoriously terrible places in the land, but he had managed to somehow miss the fact that Mo-qianbei is actually the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian. His father chose the *Yiling Patriarch* as his cultivation partner.

His head is spinning a little, and Jin-gongzi’s yelling does not help. Zizhen-xiong is the only one who seems entirely optimistic even when he’s tied hands-to-feet inside a cave in the Burial Mounds that smells of dirt and ash and blood, but he seems entirely unconcerned that Mo-qianbei is the Yiling Patriarch.

“So what if he’s the Yiling Laozu?” Zizhen-xiong asks, glaring at Jin-gongzi. “Wei-qianbei saved all our lives in Yi City—and you saved his saved yours twice even before that! Why would you *stab* him?”

“He killed my parents!” Jin-gongzi yells, red at the face. The rest of them go suddenly silent at the reminder.

Sizhui would have interfered, normally; an argument like this isn’t getting them anywhere. But he has other things to sort through first. Jin-gongzi and Zizhen-xiong can’t fight anyway; they’re all tied up and their swords are gone. There are so many of them; Jin-gongzi and their own Lan disciples, the Ouyang and Yao disciples from Yi City, some Jiang disciples and others from smaller sects. Sizhui can’t understand how they managed to get all of them here.

The pressing problem is that they’re been in this cave for so long already, he’s getting hungry. Zizhen-xiong said they had been here a whole day already. Sizhui doesn’t know how long it will be until either their families or someone else comes for them. He’s not sure they can afford to wait, but all of them can practice inedia, and there’s really nothing else they can do. That, and Jingyi has been silent ever since they were told of what happened in Carp Tower.

His father admitted that he knew Mo-qianbei was the Yiling Patriarch the whole time. Suddenly, Mo-qianbei’s words make much more sense. Of course he looked sad and said they had known each other for a long time. Sizhui has always heard that father and the Yiling Patriarch were rivals, but father never told him anything; except for the lessons where he included some of the Yiling Patriarch’s inventions, and made sure to underline how important

his demonic cultivation was in the war, how everyone had easily accepted it then, when they needed it, but not after.

Sizhui does not condone stabbing people. He understands Jin-gongzi's reaction and understands that Jin-gongzi has a right to be upset about this. But they said the Yiling Patriarch loved his sister, and Sizhui can't imagine the man who jokingly helped them in Yi City killing Jin-gongzi's parents. He can't imagine that man murdering thousands of people on a whim. Mo-qianbei did not look like that sort of person. And if his father had stood up for him, then Sizhui knows that there must be more to the Yiling Patriarch than they've been told.

Their history books were written by the people who won, in the end; no one asked the Yiling Patriarch *his* side of the story, and the Lan Sect rules say not to condemn someone without knowing all the facts. So far, Sizhui knows that the Yiling Patriarch was kind and gentle, when he met him, he was virtuous, he had saved their lives without expecting so much as a thank you in return, and he made father happy.

Sizhui isn't sure where exactly his mother fits into this, but he tries to ignore that for now. Father is happy, which is the important thing.

Then, there is also the fact that Sizhui is not afraid. They are in the Burial Mounds, a place so filled with resentful energy one couldn't *breathe* here until the Yiling Patriarch settled in it. They are held captive in a cave that smells of ash and blood, and there's a feeling in Sizhui that feels this is familiar. It's the way he felt when he ate the congee in Yi City, that strange sense of déjà vu that leaves him sad and chasing memories of warmth and gentleness that he can't reach. He wants to reach for the butterfly, the red ribbon, but he can't because his hands are tied.

"Stop arguing," he tells everyone, his voice loud enough and his input sudden enough that they fall silent. "This will not help us at all. Being held captive is bad enough, do you want to argue on top of it? Our families will come find us soon enough."

"What if they don't?" a small voice asks from somewhere Sizhui can't see. He doesn't recognize the voice. A foreign disciple, then.

"They will," he says with more confidence than he's feeling. "You shouldn't lose faith so easily. And as for our captors—I don't think the Yiling Laozu has captured us, Jin-gongzi. As Zizhen-xiong said, we encountered him before, and he saved our lives. If he wanted to kill us, he had many chances to do so."

"He bewitched Hanguang-jun!" one of the Yao disciples cried. "He's killed so many people, how can you defend him?"

"Hanguang-jun is too powerful a cultivator to be *bewitched* by anyone," Sizhui says sharply; offended on his father's behalf. "If Hanguang-jun decided to trust Wei-qianbei, then we shouldn't question his decision when we have none of the facts. *Yes*, the Yiling Laozu has killed many people, and I never said he didn't. Just because he killed someone in the past doesn't mean he will do it again now. Our parents killed people during the Sunshot Campaign, but no one says they will do so again."

It shuts most of them up effectively, and Sizhui does not feel satisfied about this. Not too much, anyway. It's not long before Jin-gongzi says something to the other Jin-gongzi and another not-quite argument breaks out.

"Sizhui," Jingyi says quietly. They're tied back to back, so Sizhui can't turn and see him, but his voice is easy enough to hear. "Sizhui, do you really think that Mo-qianbei is the Yiling Laozu?"

"Yes," Sizhui tells him. He's sure of that much, at least; Mo-qianbei is too powerful, too well-versed in demonic cultivation, and Sizhui hasn't seen anyone else catch up with his father with such ease. The calculative eyes, the sharp focus, the Paint Eyes Summoning, the Empathy; if they assume Mo-qianbei was Wei Wuxian the whole time, it makes sense. Jiang-zongzhu had been right the whole time, even if Zidian didn't expel a soul.

"But why would Hanguang-jun side with him?" Jingyi wonders furiously. "Sizhui, the Yiling Laozu is *evil*."

"Was the man who saved us at Yi City evil?" Sizhui returns. "Did he feel evil to you?" Jingyi doesn't answer, which means no. "Jingyi, a-die wouldn't have trusted him is he was evil, you know that. He's *Hanguang-jun*, when has his judgement been wrong? If he trusts the Yiling Laozu, then it can only be that there are parts of the story we don't know."

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For once, Sizhui thinks the history books in the Lan library did a terrible job at describing the events after the Sunshot Campaign. At the very least, they did a terrible job in describing the Yiling Patriarch.

There were differences, too many differences between the man who saved then in Yi City and the Yiling Patriarch of the legends. But there were also similarities between the man who stood in front of all the clans and exposed Su-gongzi's plan and the Yiling Patriarch. Sizhui feels a little cheated, because no one prepared him for the reality of how *smart* Wei-qianbei is. He knows, logically, that the Yiling Patriarch must have been brilliant, if his inventions were anything to go by. But it's one thing to know it, and another altogether to see it in action.

Not to mention that Wei-qianbei had turned himself into bait so they could all escape. Sizhui struggles to find which part of this man's personality, except for the demonic cultivation, made everyone assume he was evil. He struggles to understand *why* and *how* that man could have killed so many people.

He took the paper butterfly out of his sleeve a while ago, and he doesn't have the heart to let go of it yet. Jingyi spent all the walk back to Yiling's harbor chattering excitedly about how amazing Hanguang-jun was when he was fighting, and how well he and Wei-qianbei fought together. Sizhui keeps replaying Wei-qianbei's whisper of *a-Yuan* in his mind. The man hasn't called him anything other than his courtesy name; Sizhui doesn't think Wei-qianbei *knows* that his birth name is Yuan. It raises a lot of questions.

He wonders if it has anything to do with the ease he felt in the Burial Mounds, the feeling of inexplicable *something* that tug at his heartstrings, the ache in his bones. He feels like he's on

the verge of something groundbreaking and wonders if this is what finally kicks his memories back into life. The thought gives him a terrifying kind of thrill.

When he hears Jingyi fall silent, he turns to ask if there's something wrong, but it's pretty easy to see what it is, when all his friends' eyes are glued to the Ghost General who is slowly approaching. Even Zizhen-xiong, who had not hesitated to defend Wei-qianbei, takes several hasty steps back. Sizhui can understand that; Wei-qianbei is alive, but the Ghost General is not. The Ghost General is a fierce corpse, and to see one act so much like one of them was strange. He makes a gesture at Jingyi that he will be fine.

The Ghost General moves forward, notices Sizhui's friends getting out of the way, and then takes several steps back. Sizhui cannot find it in himself to be afraid or unsettled by the Ghost General; he doesn't find himself surprised or anxious to see this particular fierce corpse in his line of sight. The Ghost General fits there.

"What… what's your name?" the Ghost General asks, looking right at him. His face is blank, frozen in death, but he can swear there's something almost shy about it. Sizhui walks forward with resolve, bowing to him deeply.

"I am a disciple of the Lan Sect," he says. "My name is Lan Yuan, courtesy name Lan Sizhui."

"Do you know who gave you your name?" the Ghost General asks. It's a strange question, but he supposes the weirdest thing should be that it's coming from a corpse.

"My parents, of course," he says easily. Bofu had said that father picked the name. "Hanguang-jun gave me my name and my courtesy name both." The Ghost General stays silent at this, looking around. "Gho—Wen-gongzi," Sizhui says cautiously. "Is there something wrong with my name?"

"No!" the Ghost General looks straight at him and shakes his head. "Not at all! You just… you just remind him of one… one of my distant relatives." Sizhui smiles, and he can hear Zizhen-xiong and Jingyi snort behind him. The Ghost general looks so familiar, Sizhui thinks he might have met him before—but he hasn't. He couldn't have. "Lan-gongzi? Gongzi?" Sizhui looks back at the Ghost General, who seems almost nervous. "Can I… can I call you a-Yuan?"

It's such a strange request, and the address is too familiar; he should refuse. But there's something about the way his name is said… it's different form the way father says it, but Sizhui feels like he's been hearing it like this all his life.

"Of course," he tells the Ghost General, and manages a genuine smile. The Ghost General's lips pull upwards a little, in something that might resemble a smile; he supposes it would have been one, if he was alive for it.

"A-Yuan," the Ghost General says. It's not soft, exactly, his tone, but Sizhui feels it in his bones; something warm and familiar. "A-Yuan, how have you been all these years?"

“I’ve been living well,” Sizhui replies, letting himself wonder for a moment if he’s really having that conversation with the Ghost General, like the two of them are old friends. The Ghost General nods, like that answer satisfies him. And then he pulls out a paper butterfly and Sizhui forgets how to breathe.

There’s something, the same thing that needled his mind in that marketplace before; but this time he can place the memory. A sunny day, a market, a white sleeve that might be Hanguang-jun’s handing him a paper butterfly from a stall, the feeling of twirling it in the air. It’s only after the Ghost General speaks again that he realizes his eyes are filled with tears and he quickly moves to take the offered toy.

Jingyi looks at him in concern as he clutches the toy during the whole way to Lotus Pier, but between the seasickness and the knowledge that he managed to get back at least a piece of his memories, Sizhui can’t pay too much attention to Jingyi’s fretting. Jingyi continues to fret when Sizhui volunteers to stay with Wen-gongzi, giving Sizhui a concerned raised eyebrow, and Sizhui manages to convey that he will be *fine*, Jingyi. There’s something about Wen-gongzi that feels achingly familiar and Sizhui *needs* to know what it is.

“Wen-gongzi,” Sizhui tells him, when they stand looking at Sect Leaders gathering together. “How did you meet Wei-qianbei?”

“Oh, he… he met me, really,” Wen-gongzi says. “It was… it was an archery contest in Qishan and I was… I was practicing and he complimented… he complimented my archery skills. Defended… he defended me against Wen-er-gongzi, back then. He was… he was so kind. He really didn’t have to… to defend me, he didn’t even know me.”

Sizhui smiles. From what he’s seen of Wei-qianbei, he can picture that. “What was Wei-qianbei like? Before?”

“He… he hasn’t changed a lot,” Wen-gongzi tells him. He doesn’t stutter as much, and Sizhui wonders if it’s a practice thing or if fierce corpses can get nervous. “He was… bright. Laughed a lot, though not… not as much, at the end. He was very smart, like my jiejie. But he was also… Wei-gongzi is very kind, a-Yuan. Jiejie used to say it was both his redeeming quality and his doom.”

The description needles at Sizhui’s brain, and he wonders why it sounds familiar. “Your sister, you say?” he asks carefully. “I noticed that… that was your family, in the Burial Mounds, wasn’t it? I am very sorry, Wen-gongzi.”

“Yes, they were,” Wen-gongzi nods minutely. “Thank you. We were… we were grateful to even be alive—we wouldn’t have lived… lived even that long, if it wasn’t for Wei-gongzi. He was so kind to us. He helped us so much, did... he did so much for us. He my sister argued all the time, but they cared for each other. Jiejie would yell at him, when we were... he would say… he would claim to be a great cook, but his dishes were all so spicy no one could eat them. I… I had more luck cooking with the radishes.”

“Can I ask, what was your sister like?” Sizhui asks. They say the Ghost General’s sister was Wen Qing, the best doctor of the Wen Sect, a medical genius. They don’t say anything else about her.

“My jiejie was the best… she was the best doctor,” Wen-gongzi says, and this time, there’s naked pride and affection in his voice. “She was kind, and she loved… she loved her family, wanted to protect all of us. Felt like… like it was her responsibility, to take care of us. She and Wei-gongzi had that in common. She was very smart. Jiejie was very smart. And strict. She was strict too.”

Sizhui smiles, glancing at the Ghost General. If he wasn’t a fierce corpse, he thinks, he would be smiling sadly, perhaps a little wistfully too. He thinks of the Burial Mounds who smelled of ash and blood and how he wasn’t scared, thinks of the Wen remnants living there with Wei-qianbei. He noticed a lotus pond, on his way out; rotten and abandoned, and wonders if the Burial Mounds looked more lived in, with the Wens there.

“What was it like, living in the Burial Mounds, Wen-gonzgi?” he asks. Did they feel safe there, like he did?

“It was hard, at first,” Wen-gongzi says. He’s not stuttering almost at all now. “It was a hard place to live in, nothing grew… nothing grew there. Jiejie and Wei-gongzi, they would argue about whether we should… we should plant radishes or potatoes. Wei-gongzi wanted potatoes. But jiejie… jiejie always won. Wei-gongzi complained about it, but he didn’t really mind. He… he missed his family, and we would… we would try and cheer him up, but he was still…” Wen-gongzi shakes his head. “He even managed to grow lotus flowers there. Jiejie was impressed.”

“The lotus flowers grew?” Sizhui asks. He saw them, but to know they succeeded…

“Oh yes,” Wen-gongzi tries to smile again. “My cousin… one of my cousins was only four, then, and he had never seen lotus flowers before. He tried to eat the seeds whole. Wei-gogzi told him to keep them in his pockets and they would bring him luck.”

Sizhui swallows. That is familiar. He can remember where that’s familiar from. “What happened to your cousin?”

“I… I don’t know,” Wen-gongzi says. “But I think… I hope someone found him. And gave him a good family—the family we couldn’t.” Sizhui feels the overwhelming desire to cry. “Wei-gongzi… Wei-gongzi used to care for him, during the days. He was very good with kids, and my cousin liked him. He would… he would latch into his leg and never let go. Wei-gongzi made sure… he made my cousin laugh a lot. He used to… he used to plant him in the dirt and told him he would grown like a little radish. That Wei-gongzi could grow him friends.”

Sizhui’s breath catches. *She used to call you her little radish,* father had said, and Sizhui had thought the nickname was very strange. Maybe… maybe it was a thing from Yunmeng? *Your mother*, father had said, *was bright. She laughed thoughtlessly. She was kind—you are kind like her, a-Yuan.*

“Hanguang-jun… Hanguang-jun even visited Wei-gongzi there, once,” Wen-gongzi continued. “He invited Hanguang-jun to a meal, but run out before he could pay, and Hanguang-jun… he payed the tab, in the end. Jieiie said she should scold him, but he hadn’t

been… he hadn't been eating well, so that was good at least, that he ate. We didn't have… we didn't have a lot of food there."

Sizhui finds himself blinking back tears. "I hope your cousin grew up with a very nice family, Wen-gongzi," he says, finding his voice is wobbling a bit.

"I hope so too," Wen-gongzi replies, looking at him with that small attempt of a smile, and there's something in his expression, even though it's blank, that makes Sizhui's heart hurt.

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"What's up with you?" Jingyi asks. His voice is casual, but Sizhui can hear his worry. "We're running after the Young Mistress Jin, and you haven't even said anything!"

"I'm fine, Jingyi," Sizhui smiles at him. "Just thinking."

"Yes, I'm thinking about how stupid Jin Ling is as well," Jingyi says, and it's clearly a bait to get him to laugh. Sizhui snorts anyway.

"That is not what I'm thinking about, Jingyi," he tells him, amused. "Don't be rude."

"Rude to who?" Jingyi scoffs. "He's not here to hear me, is he? And if he didn't want me to say that, then he shouldn't have run off like an idiot! I took my eyes off him for the few seconds it took me to wrestle Zizhen-xiong for these loafs—and I got these for you, Sizhui! —and he disappeared!"

"We'll find him," Sizhui tells him. "You should follow Fairy, and I'll look around to see if there's anything we missed."

"Fine."

Sizhui feels distracted, raw, on the edge of a discovery he's not sure he wants to make. His heart beats loudly in his ears and Wen-gongzi's words keep replaying in his mind, merging with his father's from so long ago. He stops at the next corner, looks around just to be sure, and takes out his paper butterfly with the red ribbon, and the paper butterfly Wen-gongzi gave him. They're almost identical.

Wei-qianbei plays the dizi, and he plays it really well, not the awful way he played it—on purpose, Sizhui thinks—when he was pretending to be Mo Xuanyu. His mother, Sizhui has been told, played the dizi too. And the lotus seeds that will bring him luck, he's always thought his mother had told him that. And the red ribbon… Sizhui runs his fingers over it. The Yiling Patriarch wore a red ribbon; it was one of his characteristics, they say, red. And here, Sizhui has a red hair ribbon—a red ribbon like the one Wei-qianbei wears now. And father loves Wei-qianbei very much—the way bofu said he loved mother.

But that's just coincidental, surely. There's not… it can't… Wen-gongzi said his cousin was four years old then, which would mean that he should be around Sizhui's own age now, if he was alive. Around his exact age, maybe. And why Wen-gongzi buy him a children's toy, ask to call him so familiarly?

*You just remind me of one of my distant relatives.*

*Hanguang-jun visited Wei-gongzi in the Burial Mounds.*

*My little radish.*

*He buried my cousin in the dirt, like a radish.*

*I think… I hope someone found him. And gave him a good family—the family we couldn't.*

There are memories that accompany them, fragments of something that used to whole. A red and white pair of robes, someone throwing dirt over him, the face of a man in a beard, smiling at him. An elderly lady. A tall man in black and red robes, lifting him up to the sky. The strict scolding of a woman whose hands are gentle on him. A dizi, black as the night, that played only lullabies.

Sizhui is gripping the paper butterflies so tight he's afraid he'll break them. He needs to find —they're here to find Jin-gongzi. He needs to start looking again. Carefully, he puts the paper butterflies back into his sleeve, and frowns at the noise from behind him. There was no one there.

"Wen-gongzi?"

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After the Guangyin Temple has collapsed, Sizhui wants to run to father and make sure he's okay, wants to ask Wei-qianbei if he can see his dizi; Chenqing, the ghost flute. He does none of these things and runs to Wen-gongzi instead.

He's only slightly out of breath.

"Wen-gongzi," he says, swallowing nervously. "Wen-gongzi, your cousin, what was his name?"

"Wen Yuan," Wen-gongzi says gently. "His name was Wen Yuan, but we all called him a-Yuan."

When Jingyi finds him, sometime later, he's still standing on the same spot, with Wen-gongzi a few paces away. He doesn't know how he invited himself to visit the graves of Wen-gongzi's—of his own—family, but he has. Jingyi is a healthy dose of the present, reminding them that things continue to evolve around them, even when Sizhui is having a meltdown.

"Where have you *been?"* Jingyi demands. "Are you okay? Sizhui, talk to me."

There's only one thing he can say. He knows Jingyi will understand.

"Jingyi, I remember my mother," he says, unable to keep the smile from his face. Jingyi's eyes go wide, comically so. "He's not a woman."

Jingyi's face scrunches up in confusion. "Sizhui, what?"

“I was wrong, Jingyi, I don’t have a mother,” Sizhui continues, trying to find the words to make his friend understand. “When I was very little, I used to live in the Burial Mounds with Wei-qianbei, and my name was Wen Yuan. Wei-qianbei used to plant me in the dirt, like a radish, and throw me up in the sky like I was flying. He played father’s song on his dizi for me and he grew a lotus pond in a graveyard and told me to keep the seeds in my pockets because they would bring me good luck. He introduced me to Hanguang-jun and gave me his ribbon and said it would keep me safe. Jingyi, Jingyi, a-die and I have been missing Wei-qianbei the whole time. He was her the whole time.”

Jingyi is starring. Sizhui is pretty sure that if he doesn’t close his mouth, flies may take permanent residence there, or it might just stay stuck like this. He reaches out and closes it.

“But—” Jingyi tries, and words seem to fail him. “Then that—what—but I don’t—Sizhui. Sizhui, are you…” he swallows, and then he nods, accepting. He can tell Jingyi has questions, but he’s grateful he’s not asking them now. “Does Wei-qianbei know?” Jingyi asks finally. “I saw him and Hanguang-jun leaving.”

Sizhui promises his friend that he will be back, and then takes off running again.

It all seems so simple now. That’s what he’s been missing. That’s what was missing. Lan Sizhui wasn’t missing his mother. He was missing his diedie. He was missing a man who was tall like the sunrise and had a laugh like the chiming of silver bells, who was kind and warm and lived in the shadows and promised him he would keep him safe, no matter what. He’s been missing Wei-qianbei, his *diedie*.

And he was so silly! To think that father would ever fall in love with anyone else. Father, who had only ever loved diedie. Who had loved diedie even back then, who had found Sizhui alone in the Burial Mounds after everyone else was gone and took him with him, and then raised him as his own son; raised him to kind like diedie was. He can hear father's voice in his head, and he puts the words right this time.

*He was like the sun. He was beautiful. Happy. He was a very happy person. He laughed thoughtlessly, like every little thing could give him joy no matter how small it was. He loved you more than anything else—he used to call you his little radish. And he was… he was clever—cleverer than most people. He was inventive and ingenious, but rarely applied himself. He could do… extraordinary things when he put his mind to it. He didn’t like it here, in the Cloud Recesses—he was a free spirit and the rules confined him. He was loud and rude, and kind, immensely so. You are kind like him, a-Yuan. You have a heart as big as his.*

*Kind.* Sizhui can be kind for him.

When he’s finally there, standing in front of Wei-qianbei, he feels nervous even when he knows there’s nothing to be nervous about. Wei-qianbei and father are both here, and Wen-gongzi is a few feet behind him. Sizhui’s family is here; it’s *whole* this time. The empty space of diedie’s absence is filled again.

“Wei-qianbei…” Sizhui swallows, “I am that a-Yuan!”

He throws his hands over Wei-qianbei, and he's taller now—almost taller than Wei-qianbei in this body—but the embrace feels familiar, it feels *right*. It's not the way he was carried on Wei-qianbei's hip, not the same way he fisted his hands into his robes, but it's close enough, familiar enough, and his heart feels like it will burst with how warm and large it feels; he can't stop the tears, and Wei-qianbei rubs his hands over his back. This is *right*.

"Silly boy," Wei-qianbei laughs, chocked with tears of his own. "Why are you crying?"

Sizhui hugs both father and Wei-qianbei, nestles himself between them, and it feels like home.

End Notes

sizhui: i'm glad you found someone you can be happy with even thought it's not my mother
wwx: if a-yuan was alive he would have been a teenager now
lwj, who has forgotten to inform his husband and son of each other: (softly, but with feeling) oh fuck

title was inspired from the song "My Eyes" by the Lumineers

you can find me on tumblr and twitter and say hi, and this fic is also retweetable here!

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